

Arche-tectures: Matisse and the End of (Art) History

Author(s): Alastair Wright

Source: *October*, Vol. 84 (Spring, 1998), pp. 44-63

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779208>

Accessed: 10-09-2016 22:35 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/779208?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*

Arche-tectures: Matisse and the End of (Art) History*

ALASTAIR WRIGHT

Whenever we find architectural construction elsewhere than in monuments, whether it be in physiognomy, dress, music, or painting, we can infer a prevailing taste for human or divine authority.

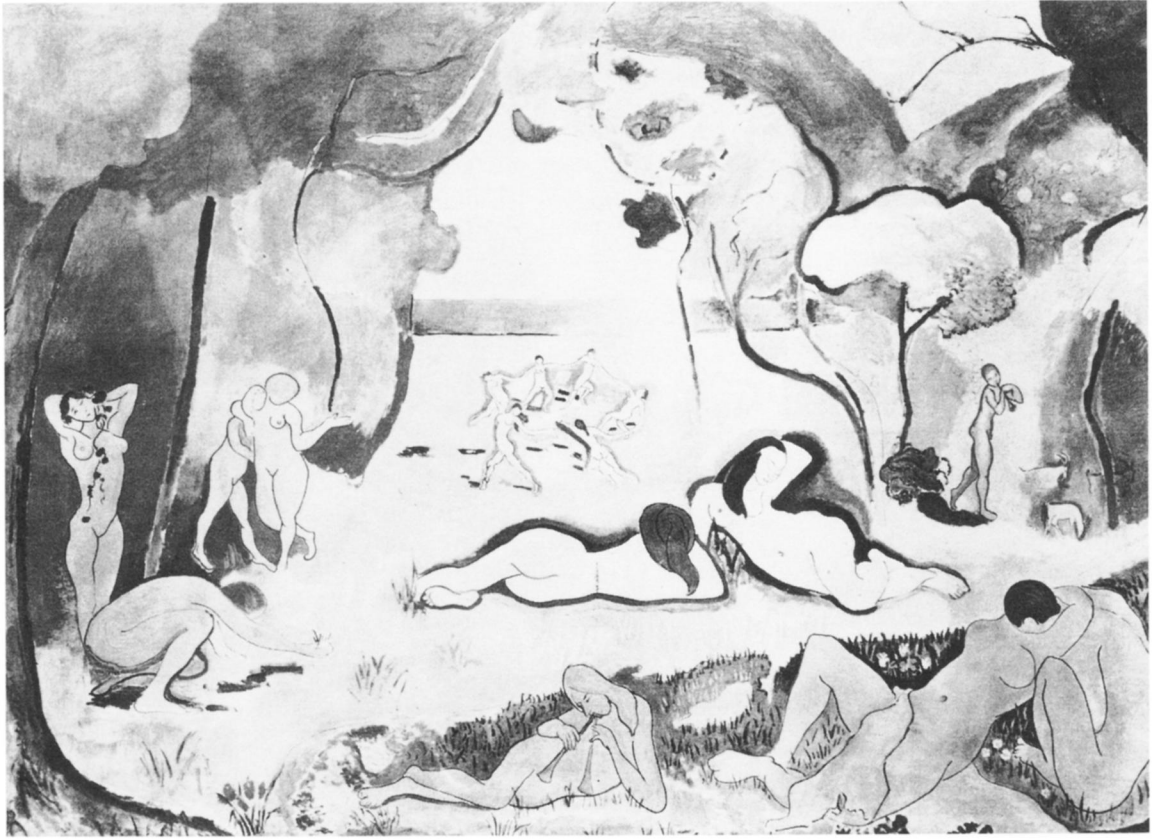
—Georges Bataille, “Architecture” (1929)

Le Bonheur de vivre, Matisse’s only entry at the Salon des Indépendants of spring 1906, was his most ambitious painting to date, the product of the autumn and winter months in his Paris studio following a summer spent in Collioure. To a composition based loosely on a small, spontaneous study painted in the south, *Paysage de Collioure/Étude pour Le Bonheur de vivre*, Matisse added an assortment of nude and seminude figures. Though this working procedure was similar to that adopted for *Luxe, calme et volupté*, painted the previous year, the final product was quite different. Abandoning the divided tones of the earlier work, Matisse turned to flatter areas of color and an increased role for line and contour, eliciting Signac’s famous condemnation: “On a canvas of 2.50 meters he has surrounded strange silhouettes with a line as thick as your thumb. Then he has covered the whole thing with flat, smooth colors which, although pure, give you nausea . . . it evokes the worst Ranson, the most detestable *cloisonnisme*.”¹

* This paper is drawn from my doctoral dissertation. I would like to acknowledge my profound debt to my advisors, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, and Yve-Alain Bois, for their constant support and advice. Jonathan Crary and John Elderfield’s responses to the dissertation helped to strengthen the argument which follows, while I am particularly grateful to Jos Hackforth-Jones and Michèle Cohen for their acute questions and comments on a draft of the current paper. Finally, I would like to thank Celeste Lovette, Virginia Heckert, and Nancy Aykanian for their help with earlier versions of this material.

1. Signac to Charles Angrand, January 14, 1906, quoted by Alfred Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 82. For a lucid discussion of Matisse’s turn away from pointillism, see Yve-Alain Bois, “Matisse and Arche-Drawing,” in his *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

OCTOBER 84, Spring 1998, pp. 45–63. © 1998 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



*Henri Matisse. Le Bonheur de vivre.
1905-6.*

The painting, it is often suggested, represents the moment at which Matisse finally freed himself from the weakening clutches of the old century—still so evident in *Luxe, calme et volupté*'s affiliation with pointillism—to emerge blinking into the light of the new. Certainly the work marked in many ways a radical departure (its canonical place in histories of modernism would seem to confirm this). And yet the painting also refers insistently to the visual past, and specifically to the classical tradition: the title evokes the theme of the classical Golden Age; and the composition retains elements of classical pictorial structure, most notably in the *repoussoir* formed by the foliage. As John Elderfield has suggested, the work bears a strong, though problematic, resemblance to Ingres's *Golden Age* of 1862.² The question thus arises: What does this odd conflation of the new and the classical signify?

I am not the first to ask this question. A number of writers, taking note of the painting's classical elements, have argued that Matisse's work should be seen as being enmeshed in the politically conservative revival of classicism in early

2. John Elderfield, "Describing Matisse," in *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 54.



Matisse. Landscape at Collioure/Study for Le Bonheur de vivre. 1905.

twentieth-century France. According to this thesis, the painting brings the present and the classical past into unity, offering a visual synthesis that finds its discursive equivalent in the nationalist desire to see modern France return to its putatively classical origins.³

Such accounts have the important merit of responding to the classical aspects of Matisse's painting. But there are problems with this line of interpretation. It seems not to be supported by the evidence of the initial response to Matisse's work. If Signac was unhappy with the painting, he was far from alone: when exhibited at the Indépendants, *Le Bonheur de vivre* provoked a storm of protest. And though such critical hostility is normally taken merely as proof of Matisse's ahead-of-his-time originality (the "shock of the new" generated by the heroic modernist innovator), further examination of the critical archive suggests that there was more at stake for the audience. Those who valorized the renewal of the French classical tradition were the most uneasy, and they articulated their disquiet in terms of the painting's failure to engage with that tradition—or, at least, to do so in an appropriate manner.

It is on the crucial issue of how to read the work's classical elements that I disagree with recent interpretations. The critics were right, I think, to question the "classicism" of Matisse's painting. Though the canvas sinks its roots deeper into the pictorial past than had his earlier works, it is nevertheless permeated by features that violently subvert rather than affirm the integrity of the French classical tradition. This, in turn, brings into question the reading of Matisse's painting in the context of conservative nationalism, for the subversion of the classical points to a very different interpretation of the work's cultural politics. *Le Bonheur de vivre*, I will be arguing, operates as a refusal of the contemporary drive to reconstruct the French classical tradition, a refusal, that is to say, of the production of a national (art) history.⁴

*

That refusal operates first and foremost in visual terms. The pictorial structures of classicism begin to unravel in Matisse's canvas as pictorial stability dissolves into confusion. If the foliage provides a makeshift proscenium arch, the stage upon which the figures are arranged is ambiguous: jarring disjunctions in scale between the various foreground figures, together with the vertiginous collapse of space between these figures and the distant (but how distant?) ring of dancers,

3. Among the more thoughtful of these interpretations is that offered by James D. Herbert in *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), especially pp. 112–45. See also Roger Benjamin, "The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation," *Art Bulletin* 75, no. 2 (June 1993), pp. 295–316; and Theodore Reff, "The Reaction against Fauvism: The Case of Braque," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 30.

4. Yve-Alain Bois suggests that *Le Bonheur de vivre* commits an act of violence against tradition, a patricide of artistic forebears ("On Matisse: The Blinding," *October* 68 [Spring 1994], p. 104). I would concur, and add that the painting thus said "no" also to the cultural values embedded in that tradition.

disrupt the painting's spatial coherence. The painting was described as "catapult-like [*catapulteux*]"—not a bad effort to capture the spatial rupture and compression of the scene, the way the ground itself twists contradictorily between horizontality and verticality (could Signac's "nausea," then, be motion sickness?).⁵ The study, despite—or perhaps because of—its sketchy incompleteness, manages to convey more successfully a sense of unified space.

The canvas is permeated, too, by an entirely unclassical sense of indeterminacy in the representation of the figure. In the foreground (though to label the lower half of the painting as "foreground" is to suggest spatial order where none exists) we see ten naked figures (or is it nine-and-a-half?: that strange double figure to the right, with two bodies and one head, is hard to disentangle), figures whose cumulative effect is to bring sexual identity into question. Look at the twin bodies of that double figure, one indubitably female, the other more masculine; or the pipe player at the bottom, with his—or is it her?—lack of any clearly marked anatomy.⁶ Color, too, contributes to the work's representational instability. Hues migrate into neighboring areas of the canvas, a chromatic slippage that sets up pockets of mimetic instability—as where the sickly green hue of the crouching figure to the left leaches into the legs of the Ingresque figure behind, or where the shift from green to pink in the cloth over the leg of that double figure begins to confound material with the flesh below.

If my account is riven by fits and starts, by repeated caveats, it is perhaps in response to the properties of the painting itself. (Even here I pause, for "painting" is ambiguous: physical object or act of making? Perhaps "work," then—but no, here again there is ambiguity: object or act? Yet in that play between senses, between the work of painting and the painting as work of art, we find an ambiguity entirely true to the work/painting itself.) If, as has often been noted, the eye tends to circulate around the surface of the work, this is not only because the flattened planes of the bodies tend not to detain the eye, nor merely because the arabesques, of both figure and flora, lead the gaze across the surface.⁷ That circulatory effect derives also from the work's failure to coalesce into a stable and comprehensible unity, from the sense that across the surface of the canvas the architecture of the pictorial field begins to disintegrate.

The term "architecture" is not casually chosen. When looking at *Le Bonheur de vivre*, what strikes the viewer most insistently is the painting's destruction of the armature of perspectival space and representational form that had traditionally

5. Jean Claude, "La Vie artistique. Le Salon de la Société des Artistes Indépendants," *Le Petit Parisien*, March 26, 1906, p. 4.

6. For discussion of the painting's ambiguous presentation of gender, see Margaret Werth, "Engendering Imaginary Modernism: Henri Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre*," *Genders* 9 (Fall 1990), passim; and Elderfield, "Describing Matisse," pp. 55–56.

7. Cf. Leo Steinberg's famous comparison of looking at the painting with "watching a stone drop into water" (Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public" (1966), in *Other Criteria* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 8.). Yve-Alain Bois has written compellingly about this effect in his "On Matisse: The Blinding," passim.

structured Western painting. In this, I would suggest, we hear something of the opposition between the architectural and the anti-architectural articulated by Georges Bataille in an article published in the *Dictionnaire critique*.⁸ Bataille's discussion in "Architecture," as Denis Hollier has noted, is not limited to architecture itself but addresses the expansion of the "architectural" into other arenas. The "architectural" in painting, Bataille suggested, corresponded to "academic pictorial practice," for which the maintenance of pictorial order—and also cultural order—was a central goal. Fixity and stability thus became the key values: "Forms . . . become increasingly static." Pictorial structure and form were not, needless to say, merely pictorial values for Bataille. As the epigraph suggests, he took the "architectural" to embody both formal and political/cultural order. So, too, in painting: "The large-scale compositions of certain painters," he argued, "express the will to constrain the human spirit within an official ideal." Resistance to the architectural, on the other hand, signaled a resistance to the imposition of social order. In painting, he suggested, "[t]he disappearance of academic pictorial composition . . . opens the path to the expression (and thereby the exaltation) of psychological processes distinctly at odds with social stability."

The idea of the architectural, and of resistance to it, provides a useful vocabulary for the way in which *Le Bonheur de vivre* undermines the stability of the pictorial field. *Le Bonheur de vivre*, it seems fair to say, stands against the "architectural" order of academic painting. It refuses stasis, as we have seen, at the level both of space and of gender. It also undermines the integrity of the figure, its status as stable form—in that double figure, of course, but also in the embracing couple to the left, where the head of one figure fuses into her companion's chest while the two bodies, rendered as flat area rather than organic structure ("silhouettes," as Signac had it), slide flatly one behind the other. (To say "her," of course, is to pin down with words a body that at the visual level is far from securely gendered). The judgment of Charles Morice—"the artist has not succeeded in bringing his figures together"⁹—can be read in two senses: the painting's failure to group the figures in coherent space and its failure to maintain the integrity of individual figures.

Such an attack on the body was, for Bataille, an integral part of any resistance to the architectural. The perfected human figure was the archetype of architectural order: "The human and architectural orders make common cause, the latter being only the development of the former." An unmaking of that body, then, was seen as a means of escaping architecture's constraining power: "A path—traced by the painters—opens up towards bestial monstrosity, as if there were no other way of escaping the architectural straitjacket." It is perhaps significant, then, that in Matisse's painting the figure constitutes a kind of ruined presence, always on the

8. Georges Bataille, "Architecture," *Documents* 1, no. 2 (1929), p. 117. All Bataille quotations are from this essay. I am indebted to Denis Hollier's analysis of this essay in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

9. Charles Morice, "Le XXIIe Salon des Indépendants," *Mercure de France*, April 15, 1906, p. 537.

point of dispersing into its surroundings: toward the lower left-hand corner, a strange elision allows a single area to be read simultaneously as the “head” of the crouching figure and as the shadow of the foliage overhead; and what happens to the foot of the foremost reclining figure, which disappears into thin air—or, at least, into thin paint?¹⁰

If Matisse’s painting answers to the pictorial characteristics of the anti-architectural, might we then read the canvas in terms of Bataille’s exaltation of “psychological processes”? Such a suggestion is not without promise; certainly the effect on the spectator in front of the work, as we will see, is akin to a kind of *dérèglement*, a displacement of fixed positions. But in 1929 Bataille’s resistance to the architectural articulated also, I would venture, a resistance to nascent totalitarianism (a refusal both of the perfected body of the fascist artistic imagination and of the ordered architecture of the nationalist monument).¹¹ And in the historical moment of Matisse’s painting, the subversion of the classical would necessarily have been taken as resistance to another, though not unrelated, construction of cultural order, the reconstruction of French identity with which the architectural in painting—embodied in the inheritors of the academic classicism—was associated in the early years of the century.

*

Classicism had, of course, long been favored by those, primarily conservatives, who urged loyalty to the traditions of the nation. The critical elevation of the classical received renewed impetus in the early twentieth century, however, as part of a broader ideological effort to map an imaginary of the French nation onto the node of the classical, an effort driven by anxiety about the perceived instability of French identity. The reasons for this are undoubtedly overdetermined, but the root cause seems to have been the perception that modern France was losing its earlier coherence. With the nation shaken to its core by the divisive battle over “l’affaire Dreyfus,” with the ever increasing cosmopolitanism of Paris perceived as a growing threat to the homogeneity of the nation’s political and cultural life, and with the omnipresent threat of foreign industrial and military power—primarily German—darkening the national horizon, the task of providing a renewed and vigorous conception of French identity became a high priority.

10. The failed architecture of the human figure proved deeply disturbing for the initial audience. In exasperation one critic wondered out loud if Matisse’s figures were “men or animals” (R. de Bettex, “Le Salon des Indépendants,” *La République Française*, March 21, 1906, p. 2). He was, I suspect, playing to the gallery, and his rhetoric speaks in part of a desire to maximize the shock value of the work. But his response also points to the debasement of the human figure in *Le Bonheur de vivre* and to the very real uncertainty experienced in front of the painting (for the most part, of course, the figures are not men but women).

11. Bataille’s attack on “monumental productions [which] now dominate the whole earth, grouping the servile multitudes under their shadow” would, in Europe in 1929, surely have been read as an attack on fascist social/architectural formations. For discussion of Bataille’s developing opposition to fascism, see Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp. 124–26.

These debates permeated the aesthetic realm. Artists, the critics complained, were “no longer the illustrators of a communal belief or faith, the inspired and docile servants of the same ideal and the same desire.”¹² There was much anxiety about the lack of any unifying character among the dissonant artistic practices on display in the capital, an absence taken even by a relatively progressive critic like Charles Morice to constitute “the most famous and most peremptory expression of contemporary disorder.”¹³ Morice offered the most graphic response to this perceived failure, evoking the disjointed cityscape of modern Paris as the figure of an artistic disorder visible, he suggested, in the disconcerting array of styles on display at the Salon d’Automne.¹⁴ The architectural metaphor is significant, for it shows that the equation of architectural order with cultural “authority” is very much of the period. (Equally significant is that Morice introduced this image in the context of a denunciation of *Le Bonheur de vivre*.)

Thus it was that many of Matisse’s contemporaries sought to reconstruct and promulgate a coherent imaginary of “Frenchness,” one grounded in a historical inheritance seen as the bedrock of national identity—a myth of continuity mobilized by both right and left to provide a stable anchor by which to secure a country felt to be dangerously adrift.¹⁵ Even progressive critics increasingly tended to argue that the French were “by nature” a Latin race, that France was in essence a classical nation, and that these truths could be confirmed by pointing to the fundamentally classical nature of the French visual tradition. In the effort to define the essence of “*la France*” the classical was an apt choice, for it allowed the French to distinguish between their own supposedly Latin identity and the Germanic lands to the east and north. Thus, although the meaning of the “classical” was not entirely stable (for some it signified the French academy, for others the heritage of Greece and Rome), it was always deemed to be a quality inherent in the countries of southern Europe (France, Italy, and Greece, it was noted, each had coastlines lapped by the “cerulean currents of the Mediterranean”).¹⁶

12. André Michel, “Au Salon d’Automne, IV,” *Journal des Débats*, October 16, 1907, p. 2.

13. Charles Morice, “La quatrième exposition du Salon d’Automne,” *Mercure de France* LXIV, (November 1, 1906), p. 37. That the demand for a return to the classical gained ground equally among those of a more liberal persuasion distinguishes the early years of the twentieth century from the closing decade of the nineteenth, and prefigures the reactionary elevation of French classicism in the postwar “retour à l’ordre.”

14. “This image, this city of historical chaos—which is Paris, is it not, the city par excellence, the city both antique and new—corresponds quite closely, if I am not mistaken, to the present state of the arts” (Morice, “La quatrième exposition du Salon d’Automne,” p. 43). Morice echoed, quite deliberately, Victor Hugo’s description of Paris, penned some seventy years earlier in *Notre-Dame de Paris* and intended, like Hugo, to throw into relief an earlier, more ordered, time.

15. The search for the secure “origins” of French identity was carried out across a wide range of disciplines. Turn-of-the-century efforts to chart the evolution of the French language, for example, can be seen as at base an attempt to establish its purity and distinction; and the growing interest in prehistory masked beneath a veneer of scientific disinterest a highly motivated desire to establish the venerable biological distinction of the French race. For discussion, see Yvette Conry, *L’Introduction du Darwinisme en France au XIXe Siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1974), pp. 33ff., 95ff.

16. Louis Vauxcelles, “Le Salon d’Automne,” *Gil Blas*, September 30, 1907, p. 2.

The revival of classicism in the visual arts marked a determined effort to move beyond the chaos of later nineteenth-century painting and to rebuild the visual edifice of the French tradition. Thus it was that the critics showed a keen interest in uncovering a putatively unbroken succession linking the most recent artistic production to the venerable classicists of the French academic tradition. This effort found its concrete embodiment in the Salon des Artistes français, of course, but also, and perhaps more surprisingly, in the Salon d'Automne and the Salon des Indépendants. During the early years of the century, each exhibition regularly featured retrospectives designed to convince the visitor that modern French painting was in direct descent from respectable ancestors. At the 1905 Salon d'Automne, for example, sixty-eight paintings by Ingres were twinned with thirty-one by Manet in an attempt to demonstrate—somewhat questionably to our eyes—what Élie Faure described in his introductory essay to the exhibition's catalogue as an “imposing continuity [which] seems to descend like a river from the foundation of our race.”¹⁷ The critics were more than willing to accept the proposed equation of modern and classic, praising the Salon d'Automne for having “reestablished the true lines of the true tradition.”¹⁸

Such declarations make clear the degree to which the ideological operation of producing a national art history depended on a point of origin for the nation, an *arche* from which all else could be said to descend. The *arche*, as Derrida has argued, operates both as “commencement” and as “commandment,” providing a stable point of origin and establishing a system of rules, a law that both prescribes what lies within the boundaries (here, of French identity) and proscribes that which lies beyond.¹⁹ For the French, the classical became the national *arche* to which they enacted an eternal (nostalgic) return, a drive that exhibits symptoms of what Derrida has labeled “archive fever”: “an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”²⁰ The architecture of the classical tradition, built up—it was said—upon the classical *arche*, came to define what “Frenchness” in the visual realm looked like, embodying the historical identity, the *arche*-ecture (for Derrida, the “archive”) of the nation.

That the classical was the visual rule by which French identity was theoretically and critically ordered helps to explain the general willingness in 1905 to welcome Manet into the classical fold: to formulate a stable imaginary of the nation it was not only important to know who was in and who was out, but also to have a critical mass of artists on the inside (otherwise how could claims for the essentially classical nature of the French be maintained?). Not surprisingly, then,

17. Élie Faure, “Préface (A Eugène Carrière),” *Salon d'Automne. Catalogue de la 3e Exposition, 1905* (Paris: Société du Salon d'Automne, 1905), p. 19.

18. Louis Vauxcelles, “Le Salon d'Automne,” *Gil Blas*, September 30, 1907, n.p.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1ff. See also Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 49.

20. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 91.

other moderns were soon incorporated into the “classical” pantheon, most importantly Seurat, whose syntheses of radical modernity and classical structure were by this time widely accepted and praised (in contrast to the initial critical hostility); and Cézanne, who for many critics was rapidly becoming the primary example of a modern “classic.”²¹

Also welcomed were living artists whose work seemed to confirm the unchanging nature of French art. The later paintings of Henri-Edmond Cross, such as the *Flight of the Nymphs* of 1906, typified in the eyes of his audience the successful synthesis of the modern and the antique. Here the science of divisionism was combined with the pictorial structures of the *grande tradition* (*repoussoir*, stable recession into depth) and applied to a decidedly premodern theme drawn from the mythological past. Such conciliatory artistic strategies, not surprisingly, reaped considerable rewards: when exhibited at the 1906 Indépendants, the *Flight* was greeted by a chorus of critical approval.²²

The most significant figure in the resurrection of the French classical tradition, however, was Maurice Denis. Both critic and artist, engaged in both the theory and practice of forging a renewed classicism, Denis wrote a series of reactionary articles in the early years of the century in which he urged his young compatriots to return to what he considered their birthright: the classical *arche* of French painting.²³ His writings repeatedly stress the classical both as commencement (it was, he suggested, the “national foundation”)²⁴ and as commandment (he described the classical as the source of “order, discipline, and stability”).²⁵ To bolster the claim that the classical underlay all (true) French painting, Denis claimed to see links between a number of modern movements and the visual past: the Pont-Aven group, for example, though interested in the exotic, had solid French roots in Epinal images, tapestries, Gothic windows, and Breton calvaries; and Van Gogh and Seurat, he asserted, were “*classicistes manqués*,” interested in “construction” despite their misguided technique.²⁶

In his paintings, too, he laid down the classical law. *Bacchus and Ariadne*, painted in 1907, located its mythological theme on a coastline recognizable as the domestic shore, presenting the classical as a constituent of the national landscape—and, by implication, of France itself. Denis’s efforts in this and in similar

21. For an excellent discussion of the early twentieth-century drive to reposition Cézanne’s oeuvre as “classic,” see Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), especially pp. 152–55.

22. Roger Boutet de Monvel, for one, was much taken with “the happy composition . . . and the pretty silhouette of his nymphs and fauns” (“Les Indépendants,” *La Revue Illustré*, 1ère semestre, no. 9 [April 20, 1906], n.p.).

23. See, for example, Maurice Denis, “La Peinture,” *L’Ermitage*, 16e année, no. 5 (May 15, 1905), pp. 310–20; reprinted as “La Réaction nationaliste,” in *Théories, 1890–1910: Du Symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*, 4th ed. (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1920), pp. 181–91.

24. Denis, “La Réaction Nationaliste,” p. 190.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 197–98.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

works did not go unappreciated: "In looking at Breton coves under the sun of August he has recognized the island of the Phaeacians and the grotto of Calypso."²⁷ And though the association of the domestic landscape with classical topography was a fairly standard practice in nineteenth-century European painting, what distinguished the early twentieth-century French variant was the way in which paintings such as Denis's also brought the classical into the present by incorporating details such as the insistently modern hat of the figure seated at the right. The critics were ready to forgive such anachronisms because the ordered visual syntax of Denis's paintings—balance, harmony, and coherence in depth—conveyed the peaceful conjoining of classic and contemporary. The classical unity of the pictorial field, which is to say the painting's allegiance to the architecture of French classicism, signaled both classicism per se and the successful alloying of past and present. Thus the critics reassured their readers that Denis's incorporation of modern elements into the classical scene was beneficial rather than detrimental: it "alter[s] not at all the impression of an antique idyll, but seem[s] only to bring it closer to us, in extending through to our day the youth of the World and of history."²⁸ One could not hope for a clearer statement of the desire for the classical *arche* to be revealed at work in the here and now, operating as the guarantor of the ordered architecture of national identity.

*

Producing what was, in effect, a nationalist art history, painting and criticism functioned to reproduce in the cultural sphere the idea of France as a quintessentially classical nation, an ideological-pictorial operation that sought the solution to contemporary disorder in the forcible repair of the injured body of cultural tradition. The history of France itself, history understood as an organic continuum, was embodied in the insistent pictorial order of Denis's paintings. Making concrete a prescriptively ordered imaginary of the nation, Denis's works bespoke what Bataille labeled the "prevailing taste for . . . authority." (In the language of the day, "authority" would have spoken not only to the law of national identity but also to other kinds of "order"; note that both Cross's and Denis's images maintain the "order" of stereotypical gender roles, with sexually aggressive males chasing female figures.)

Such were the terms and stakes of the renewed interest in the classical in the early years of the century. *Le Bonheur de vivre*, of course, represented something of a fly in the nationalist ointment. The painting failed abjectly to satisfy the initial audience, and this despite the fact that certain aspects of the work recalled the classical. The reasons should be clear. Even the most cursory

27. François Monod, "Chronique. Le 22e Salon des Indépendants," *Art et Décoration*, 10 année, no. 5 (May 1906), supplément, p. 3.

28. Paul Jamot, "Les Salons de 1906," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 3e période, t. 35, 587e livraison (May 1, 1906), p. 366.

examination of Matisse's work reveals that its engagement with the classical tradition differs radically from Denis's or Cross's. It is, as we have seen, beset by an entirely unclassical sense of visual indeterminacy. Even at the level of facture the painting undoes the technical coherence demanded of the classical surface, admitting disjuncture at the level of painterly process itself. The line that skirts the upper edge of the grass before diving down to the flowers by the base of the left-hand tree seems to rest underneath the skein-like paint surface, temporally preceding its application, yet simultaneously to be scratched into the surface as supplement. The canvas is beset by such jerky alternation at the level of facture, for even apparently smooth areas reveal, upon closer inspection, juxtapositions of gloss and matte, thin and thick paint, an inconsistency that refuses any sense of closure to the surface.

This sense of openness, of visual and technical rupture which never quite allows the work to hang together, is of the utmost importance, for it means that the classical elements of the work are suspended as fragments in a canvas that offers not synthesis but incoherence. Matisse's contemporaries were certainly aware of, and anxious about, this aspect. Several critics voiced grave concerns that the painting was merely an aggregation of discordant elements.²⁹ Morice characterized *Le Bonheur de vivre* as a collection of "hesitant attempts, each one contradicted by the next"; the artist, he felt, "seems to dream of following every path at once, of expressing himself by the most irreconcilable systems."³⁰ Other critics complained that the work seemed too divided against itself, too dispersed among divergent pictorial idioms, its classical sources mixed, incongruously, with others ranging from Gauguin and Rodin to distant memories of Neo-Impressionism.³¹

How to read this fragmentary presence, this classical past which lingers on, ghost-like? It should be clear, I hope, that the art-historical model of influence, of

29. Art historians have at times been sensitive to this aspect. Both John Elderfield and Alfred Barr have pointed to the canvas's lack of synthesis; see Alfred Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), pp. 85, 92; and Elderfield, *The "Wild Beasts": Fauvism and Its Affinities* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 98. Though Barr acknowledged that "Matisse's inconsistencies of style in the *Joy of Life* [*sic*] are numerous" and that "[t]he picture does suffer somewhat from its mixture of styles," he sought to rescue the inconsistencies of the painting for the modernist narrative of creativity and pictorial unity: "That these departures from 'nature' in anatomy, perspective, scale and color should be so various and inconsistent, should derive from so many sources, is a sign of Matisse's courage, eagerness for new ideas, inventiveness and insistence upon the artist's right to take liberties—liberties with nature, with the conventions of his predecessors and even with the classic ideal of stylistic consistency itself" (*ibid.*, pp. 85, 91–92).

30. Morice, "Le XXIIe Salon des Indépendants," pp. 535–36.

31. For critical attacks on the stylistic disunity of the canvas, see Louis Vauxcelles, "Le Salon des 'Indépendants,'" *Gil Blas*, March 20, 1906, n.p.; V. de S., "Le Vernissage des 'Indépendants,'" *Le Matin*, March 20, 1906, p. 5; and Jean Tavernier, "Le Salon des Indépendants," *Grande Revue*, XXXVIII (April 1, 1906), p. 105. In observing the disunity of the canvas, the critics anticipated the artist's later characterization of his own work. Matisse would acknowledge in retrospect that his reliance with this work on "juxtapositions of things conceived independently" had left the canvas less unified than his later works; conversation with Pierre Courthion, 1941, quoted in Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), p. 242.

stylistic paternity, is here inadequate. The assumption that if a painting looks like an earlier work or set of works then it has necessarily been “influenced” is brought into question by Matisse’s fragmentary citations of the visual past. One common *modus operandi* of the discipline—the tendency to identify “sources”—misses the point, then, when brought to bear on *Le Bonheur de vivre*.³² This, in turn, brings into question the assumption that stylistic influence indicates ideological influence, that it signals an allegiance to the ideological baggage with which the earlier work or tradition was freighted.

The art-historical attempt to read the political orientation of *Le Bonheur de vivre* in terms of its putative classicism, then, needs to be reconsidered. Far from being straightforwardly influenced, *Le Bonheur de vivre* offers up the classical tradition in fragments. It occupies, I would suggest, a liminal position, both within and without the classical. The painting demands a re-theorization of Matisse’s—and modern painting’s—oft-cited “break” with the past. This is not the clean break usually claimed (at least in the celebratory modernist narrative). But there *is* rupture here. Embodying neither a break from the past nor its logical continuation, neither revolution nor evolution, Matisse’s canvas constitutes a third term, a destruction from within—or deconstruction: it is perhaps time to lay the term on the table—of the architecture of tradition.

For Matisse’s contemporaries, of course, *Le Bonheur de vivre*’s substitution of a disruptive visual operation for the authoritative classicism of Denis and his ilk was a question of far more than merely aesthetic significance. If the classical tradition was the law, the metaphorical arche-tecture of national order, then *Le Bonheur de vivre*’s mis-speaking of that language was necessarily a transgression charged with both historical and ideological significance. It is important that Matisse’s painting did not sidestep that artistic patrimony altogether—that it did not constitute a pure “other” for the classical. That would have been easier, perhaps, for the critics to deal with. The painting’s operation was radically disruptive because it lay across the boundary of the classical, deconstructing the terms of its operation and thus also the “logic of majesty and authority” embodied in the armature of tradition.

The impact on the viewer was serious. Standing in front of the painting, he or she was twice displaced. First, on a formal level: if the figures within *Le Bonheur*

32. Examples abound, including Albert Elsen’s suggestion of Rodin’s *La Ronde* as the source for the circle of dancers (Elsen, “Rodin’s ‘La Ronde,’” *Burlington* 107 [June 1965], pp. 290–99); and James B. Cuno’s suggestion that Agostino Carracci inspired that same ring (Cuno, “Matisse and Agostino Carracci: A Source for the ‘Bonheur de Vivre,’” *Burlington Magazine* 122 [July 1980], pp. 503–5). Cuno’s article, with its declaration that this is the true (and single) source for Matisse’s painting (Cuno points out that, while many sources have been suggested, none bar the Carracci contains both the composition and the dancers), best exemplifies an art-historical tendency to see the identification of the “source” for a painting as having somehow “cracked” the image. The activity of source hunting in the Matisse literature has been critiqued by Werth, “Engendering Imaginary Modernism,” pp. 49–52; and by David Carrier in his *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1991), especially p. 221 n. 3.

de vivre appear to float indecisively, so too, as a consequence, does the spectator. The viewer's relationship to the represented scene becomes unstable as the collapse of figurative space draws him or her into the painting's uncertainty. The indeterminacy of spectatorial position goes deeper than this, however, for the viewer is also unable to locate him- or herself relative to the disparate stylistic elements that circulate within the surface. This second displacement, then, derives from the painting's subversive mix of the classical and the nonclassical (of the architectural and the nonarchitectural); the work interpellates the viewer alternately as the classical subject of France and as a much more mobile and distracted subject (which is to say, as a more modern spectator).

Dislocated both spatially, as classical depth and ordered regression collapse into incoherent flux, and stylistically, as classical theme and motif collide with non-classical elements, the contemporary viewer would have been unable to find in *Le Bonheur de vivre* confirmation of his or her cultural identity as a Frenchman/woman. Rather than finding his or her place in the edifice of national identity, the viewer was cast adrift. Indeed, the very notion of coherent subjectivity is here brought into doubt. Rather than reaffirming the subject's sense of French selfhood, as Denis's paintings undoubtedly did, Matisse's canvas refuses all subject-formation—or, at least, allows that process to function only fitfully (we hear something here, perhaps, of Bataille's "psychological processes").

Calling into doubt the capacity of tradition to operate as the unifying syntax of "*la Nation*," *Le Bonheur de vivre* made visible the failure of the *arche*, presenting the classical not as living tradition but as lifeless fragment. Hence, I think, the frequent attacks on the canvas's effect of rancorous cold. Morice, for one, complained that, despite its numerous figures, "the canvas appears empty and the general impression which it gives is that of the most annoying coldness. The joy of life, that? But life is absent! . . . On such a vast scale it is an injurious barrenness."³³ In part, Morice must have been disturbed by the painting's formal qualities. For the most part the palette is surprisingly acidic, and the dirty yellow ground is patchily scrubbed in. The poverty of its chromatic and gestural range is only accentuated by the sparse dabs of thick yellow pigment and by the vertical smears of dull white paint which suggest nothing so much as pale blades of deathly grass, while overall a thinning out of the physical density of the paint surface constitutes a radical refusal of the potential sensuality of the painted surface. Seeming deliberately to refuse even the most basic demands for technical facility, the work looks—at least, this is how it must have looked to Matisse's contemporaries—like a failed painterly act.³⁴

Perhaps Morice also sensed a frigidity in the painting's theme. The image denies the theme of maternal warmth which so often characterized Denis's works,

33. Morice, "Le XXIIe Salon des Indépendants," p. 537.

34. As Steinberg writes, Matisse's "skill seems deliberately mortified or sacrificed" (Steinberg, "Contemporary Art," p. 28).



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.
The Golden Age. 1862.

replacing it with a cold adult sexuality—children are conspicuously absent. So, too, the painting refuses the *chaleur* of hedonistic sexuality associated with the myth of the Golden Age. There is none of the easy and ordered sexual congress of Ingres's *Golden Age* (where all takes place under the watchful supervision of Zeus). Neither are there the soft contours and almost palpable fleshiness that characterized Denis's women; the bodies deflect the gaze, refusing the eye its customary satisfaction in looking at "joyous" female nudes.³⁵

But more than this, I suspect, Morice was disturbed by the apparent lifelessness here of classicism itself. The painting's lack of warmth would have been perceived not merely as a formal characteristic but as a pallor pervading the body of tradition. The contrast to Denis is instructive. Critical approbation for his more legitimate rendition of the classical revolved around a vocabulary of warmth, the "warm shadow" and "burning sand" of his canvases which lent the classical a sense of vitality and vigor and thus facilitated the reading of his work as the rejuvenation of a *living* national tradition.³⁶ *Le Bonheur de vivre* has none of the harmonious warmth with which Denis imbued the classical tradition (nor, it should be noted, any of the deceptive richness and sonority of palette that color reproductions habitually and misleadingly lend Matisse's painting).

35. Again Steinberg's comments are instructive: "The heavy outlines that accost these nymphs prevent any materialization of bulk or density. They seem to drain energy away from the arc of the figure, making it radiate away into the space about them. Or perhaps it is our vision that is shunted away" ("Contemporary Art," p. 28). For further discussion, see Bois, "On Matisse: The Blinding," p. 61 ff.

36. Jamot, "Les Salons de 1906," p. 366.

The painting's cold dessication of tradition presented the visual past not as living cultural memory but as extinct history, exploding the myth of a living continuity connecting modern France to its roots in antiquity. Such powerlessness to sustain tradition as a vital force would have spoken to the contemporary fear of decadence, to the anxiety-provoking contention that the French nation had become decrepit, that its culture had passed through a period of maturity and now slumped in ever weakening old age.³⁷ And such anxieties would, in turn, have resonated with period concerns about the failure of historical recollection. The perpetual renewal under capital of both economic and cultural patterns was felt to result inevitably in an increased separation from the past, a view perhaps most persuasively argued in retrospect in Walter Benjamin's analysis of Charles Baudelaire's work.³⁸

A central aspect of life in the modern metropolis, Benjamin argued, was the severing of history from lived experience. No longer was the individual able to experience the past as a continuum within which he himself moved, as had been possible under more organic social conditions. No longer was the communal past of the culture available in the form of intuitive or collective memory—what Benjamin, following Proust, labeled *mémoire involontaire*.³⁹ Rather, tradition had become lifeless, available only as knowledge, as something that could be examined rationally and consciously—what Benjamin, again with a nod to Proust, tagged as *mémoire volontaire*. Baudelaire's work, he suggested, concretized this failure of cultural memory under modernity, operating simultaneously as a celebration of the lyric and as an acknowledgment of the impossibility of any longer producing such poetry due to the period's increasingly impoverished relationship to its own past.

Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's poetry, articulating its concomitant engagement with and distance from the classic form of lyric poetry, speaks to the way in which *Le Bonheur de vivre* summons forth the classical tradition while simultaneously calling attention to the impossibility of continuing to practice it—at least, meaningfully—under modernity. For Matisse's contemporaries, *Le Bonheur de vivre* appeared symptomatic of modernity's loss of contact with the architecture of the national tradition. (It is significant that Morice's critique of the fragmentary architecture of urban modernity came hand in hand with an attack on Matisse's painting, seen by the critic as itself bringing into ruin the architecture of classicism.)

These descriptions of Matisse's lifeless relationship to tradition, to the nation's visual history, call to mind another characterization of modernity. In

37. The language of decadence, in wide circulation at the turn of the century following the popularity of Max Nordau's scaremongering *Degeneration*, often inflected reviews of modern art—as, for example, when the works at the 1907 *Indépendants* were labeled as “over-ripe fruits . . . the waste of an over-advanced civilization . . . dead leaves . . . accumulated ruins” (“L'Actualité. Les Indépendants,” *L'Événement*, March 21, 1907, p. 3).

38. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 140ff.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 157ff.

terms that presage Benjamin's, Nietzsche had declared that for modern man the past existed merely as stimulus: the subject of modernity, he suggested, could only plunder the past in a vain search for knowledge in which all that mattered was that "the memory is ever stimulated anew."⁴⁰ It is significant, then, that a terminology of the "stimulus" was mobilized by Julius Meier-Graefe in his description of *Le Bonheur de vivre*. Pictorial elements were transplanted into Matisse's canvas, he declared, as nothing more than visual effect, as "wisps of memory" deprived of "life" and "humanity," as (mere) "physiological stimuli."⁴¹ For Meier-Graefe, as for the French critics, Matisse's work exemplified the failure of tradition that marked early twentieth-century French painting: "Earlier," he argued, "everyone sat safe and obedient in the shadow of tradition, which is where they belonged when, generally, the word 'tradition' meant something. Now that terrain has become bleak and marshy."⁴² In the German critic's evocation of the barren terrain of tradition, in his insistence that the artist's references to the visual past were deprived of life, we hear again the accusation of a frigid reprise of tradition (remember Morice's condemnation of the painting's "injurious barrenness"). For Meier-Graefe, as for Morice, this effect was the inevitable result of life under modernity; Matisse's loss of historical perspective, he argued, represented "the final extraction of modern big-city perception."⁴³

As mere "stimulus," of course, tradition could no longer signify the nation, for it was separated from the sense of lived and shared experience necessary to maintain the myth of national continuity. It was because the painting thus bespoke a loss of contact—at least, of *living* contact—with the unifying force of the French classical tradition that the critics responded with such vitriol to the work's lack of warmth. Seeming to offer up the French tradition as the stillborn child of an impotent nation, the work undermined the ideological charge with which classicism was freighted in the early twentieth century, denying its capacity to operate as a source of unifying vitality.

40. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p. 25. For Nietzsche, modern man was typified by the possession of too much historical knowledge: "From ourselves we moderns have nothing at all; only by filling and overfilling ourselves with alien ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions and knowledge do we become something worthy of notice, namely walking encyclopedias" (p. 24).

41. Julius Meier-Graefe, "Matisse, The End of Impressionism" (1923), in *Matisse: A Retrospective*, ed. Jack Flam (New York: 1988), p. 217.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

43. *Ibid.* Meier-Graefe's terms of analysis are echoed, perhaps surprisingly, in Clement Greenberg's discussion of what he called Matisse's "cold hedonism." Describing "avant-garde pastoral" as the artistic form in which one could see most clearly revealed "the most permanent features of our society's [capitalist] crisis," he related Matisse's work to the century's growing pessimism about life under bourgeois capitalism. Matisse's turn to cold pleasure—and here Greenberg closely echoes the early reaction to the frigidity of *Le Bonheur de vivre*—was, then, a manifestation of deathly pessimism and not a reinvigoration of the national tradition. For discussion of Greenberg's analysis and for the preceding quotes, see John O'Brian, "Greenberg's Matisse and the Problem of Avant-Garde Hedonism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–64*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1990), p. 149ff.



Matisse. Reclining Nude Playing Pipes:
Study for *Le Bonheur de vivre*. 1905–6.

*

Le Bonheur de vivre offered, I believe, a moment of resistance to the dominant thrust of contemporary critical and artistic practice. It was, however, merely a brief moment, one that quickly passed: the construction of national identity around a classical core continued unabated, of course; and *Le Bonheur de vivre* itself was fairly rapidly re-incorporated into a celebratory history of French art.⁴⁴ Yet, although the disturbance generated by *Le Bonheur de vivre* was short-lived, the effort of unearthing that troublesome moment has been worthwhile, I would suggest, for two reasons.

First, it offers a glimpse of the real difficulty of the painting, the way in which it resisted the reconstruction of a stable national edifice and thus pointed to a conclusion which, though Matisse's contemporaries would not, or could not, acknowledge it, perhaps rings more true today: that any attempt to visualize the mythical continuity of French identity—or, indeed, of any national identity—was, and is, doomed to fail. For the critics of the early twentieth century, the liminal

44. The recuperation of Matisse's work by mainstream French criticism during the 1920s and 1930s is documented in Elderfield, "Describing Matisse," pp. 17–18 and nn. 44–49; and in André Fermigier, "Matisse et son double," *Revue de l'Art* 12 (1971), pp. 100–7.

position occupied by the painting, neither within nor entirely without the dominant ideological and pictorial conventions of its time, meant that the canvas actualized the de(con)struction of tradition. The painting thus resisted the end, the goal, of much criticism of the day, which was to reconstitute that tradition as the visual embodiment of French cultural memory. Which is to say that for the viewer in 1906 *Le Bonheur de vivre* signaled the end, the termination, of French (art) history.

Second, it raises important questions about the discipline of art history and its technologies of interpretation. History—or, better, the writing of history—is dominated, of course, by the drive to reconstitute a unified and organic chain of events. As Hollier has observed, “[h]istory tends to be thought of in terms of progress, in the perspective of a completion that provides meaning for it.”⁴⁵ This is as true of (the writing of) art history at the close of the twentieth century as it was of a particular practice of nationalist criticism at its opening: one of the ends of art history, one of its goals, has generally been to bring the past into coherence (hence, I suspect, the prevalence of the model of influence, an unequaled mechanism for producing linear progress—history, in short—from the clutter of the visual past). However, as we have seen, *Le Bonheur de vivre* refuses such ordering of the historical field, bringing the elements of tradition—of visual history—onto the surface of a disunified canvas. Echoing in pictorial terms Nietzsche’s doubts about the possibility of orderly history—“a coherent whole [which] only exists in the imagination”⁴⁶—the work not only undermined the early twentieth-century project of reconstructing a continuous classical heritage for “*la France*.” It also continues to resist the production of history—here, the nominally disinterested production of art history—at the close of the century.

Tradition is presented in *Le Bonheur de vivre* as something akin to the detritus of the past piling up at the feet of Benjamin’s angel of history. It is for this reason that art history finds it hard to articulate the real difficulty of this painting.⁴⁷ Denying the ordered temporality of tradition, the work resists the very process of (writing) art history. (Resists for a moment: that difficulty has since been occluded by the insistent production of history.) The painting thus brings into question the disciplinary drive to produce the ordered “architecture” of history. Indeed, recent art historical accounts that locate the work within the classical tradition ironically bring to fruition a task that early twentieth-century nationalist critics could not complete: the act of incorporating Matisse’s painting into a putatively coherent tradition. There is, then, an uncomfortable consanguinity between the practice of art history and the attempt on the part of French nation-

45. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 54.

46. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History*, p. 35.

47. “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1950], in *Illuminations*, p. 257).

alists to force cultural and visual discourses into a fixed and unified national tradition. *Le Bonheur de vivre* plays against such disciplinary order, introducing into the history of art (“history” both in the sense of object—the past—and in the sense of a set of practices) a blind spot, a point of resistance to the production of ordered sequentiality. The work ultimately signals the end—the termination—of (art) history. Which is not, finally, to say that writing cannot be produced around the painting—my own text, as well as countless others, testifies to that—but that a specific and central practice of the discipline of art history is here refused.